

Reasons and Significance for Sima Qian's Creation of Records of Historian and His Writing of Tragic Heroes

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Abstract: In Sima Qian's *Records of Historian*, there are 112 works about characters, of which 57 are about tragic characters, and most of them ended with suicide. Sima Qian seems to admire these tragic characters very much. Sima Qian's composition of those tragic heroes in the *Records of Historian* is groundbreaking. Before Sima Qian, no one in ancient China ever wrote the genre of biography of tragic heroes, and his personal emotional inclination towards these tragic characters can be clearly felt in his writing. In order to understand Sima Qian's tragic writing, his personal tragic fate can be related to. Sima Qian's personal experience has given him the color of tragedy. This paper mainly explores the reasons and significance for Sima Qian's writing of tragic heroes and his creation of the *Records of Historian*. Conclusions can be drawn that Sima Qian's writing of tragic heroes is due to his appreciation of heroes with different personalities and the resonance of fate with them, and his creation of the *Records of Historian* reveals his adherence to filial piety and his view of life and death. It is also a manifestation of the thoughts of Confucius.

Keywords: Sima Qian, the historical records, tragic heroes

1. Introduction

There is no historical material that clearly records Sima Qian's life, even his birth and his death. However, more detailed records of Sima Qian's life and experiences are derived from Sima Qian's self-narration. In the *Self-narration of Tai Shi Gong* and the *A Reply to Ren An*, Sima Qian has a self-statement of his own life. Sima Qian converted his personal memory of his life into written memory through writing. The deep contact between Sima Qian and the historical figures he wrote about has always been an important source of attraction for this work. The plans of history and the experiences of historical figures have special significance for Sima Qian [1]. So it can be understood that Sima Qian is also, to some extent, a "tragic hero" created by himself. His description of his own life is also what he intends to show to future generations. The historical records and facts of the predecessors are the main source of material for the creation of hero biographies. At the same time, "folklore" and "word of mouth" are also one of the original sources of many hero biographies. Sima Qian has his own consideration and purposes in the selection of the characters in the *Records of Historian*. Therefore, this paper studies the reasons and significance for Sima Qian's writing of tragic heroes and his creation of the *Records of Historian* [2].

2. Reasons and Significance for Sima Qian's Writing of Tragic Heroes

2.1. Appreciation of Heroes with Different Personalities

The tragic heroes in Sima Qian's works can be roughly divided into three categories: meritorious ministers, loyal ministers, and people of great significance to history. Here are three typical representatives for these three categories, namely Li Guang, Qu Yuan, and Xiang Yu. Li Guang is a representative of meritorious ministers, and Qu Yuan is a representative of loyal ministers. Both of them are ministers who care about the people of the country, but what disappoints both of them is the emperor they had worked for all their lives. Then it degenerates to the end of desperate suicide. Xiang Yu is a person who plays an important role in promoting the process of historical development. According to Sima Qian's description in Xiang Yu's biography, at that time, Xiang Yu had four hundred thousand soldiers in Hongmen, Xinfeng, and Pei Gong had one hundred thousand soldiers in the Ba Shang [3]. His explanation made the readers understand that there is a huge gap between the strength of Liu and Xiang groups - the strategic advantage is obviously on Xiang Yu's side. However, the seemingly objective and calm narration is full of Sima Qian's regret. Finally, Xiang Yu's suicide was defined as a noble act. The outstanding scenery and achievements of the tragic heroes in the first half of their lives and the final suicide outcome complement each other, sublimating their personal image and adding a solemn color. It is enough to see Sima Qian's personal appreciation of Xiang Yu by listing him as the "Ben Ji" ("Ben Ji" is usually the exclusive term for biographies written for emperors). In *Xiang Yu Ben Ji*, Sima Qian's description of Xiang Yu's related events and Xiang Yu himself is mostly positive and courageous. However, in *Gao Zu Ben Ji*, the description and selection of Xiang Yu focus more on the analysis of the reasons for his failure, where Xiang Yu is more "immoral" and reckless [4].

2.2. Resonance in the Fate of Sima Qian and the Tragic Heroes in *Records of Historian*

The tragic fate of Sima Qian himself made him create an original writing style called "Fa Fen" in the writing process of the *Records of Historian*. "Writing books in Fa Fen" also enables Sima Qian to clearly express his own preferences in the text, makes the *Records of Historian* more humanized, and achieves the goal of "creating a philosophy of one's own". However, although "Fa Fen" has emotional characteristics, it is not emotional catharsis, but a rational view of fate. "Fa Fen" is a verb-object compound. The verbal element, Fa, simply means to release, to shoot forth (as an arrow), and to express. Emphasizing the spirit quality of not being depressed in adversity adds a critical color to the text. In this way of writing, Sima Qian's personal emotions can also be released in the most appropriate way. He can look at the personal fate of these tragic heroes from a historical perspective and rationally analyze the reasons for their failures" [5].

Sima Qian called himself a "transmitter" of history, not a "creator" [6]. But in fact, these tragic heroes displayed in front of future generations are, to a large extent, the creations of Sima Qian's works. The transformed written memory cannot be completely consistent with historical reality. It has a clear ideological color. The same is true of Sima Qian's creation. He takes the historical facts that have occurred in the past as the basis of his existence, but through his choice of materials, he obtains identity from the life of tragic heroes with the same frustration experience, thus achieving certain social influence. Here "identity" can be emphasized. Sima Qian's creation and theme selection of the *Records of Historian* are always centered on the purpose of "achieving identity". Sima Qian believes that only by finding a suitable group for himself can he transmit his thoughts and ideas to future generations, and only as an ideology can it always exist in writing and in the memory of future generations. By analyzing Sima Qian's characterization of Xiang Yu, it can be found that Sima Qian subverts the traditional idea that "history is written by winners". Because

Xiang Yu was the main force to overthrow the violent Qin Dynasty. Secondly, Xiang Yu is pure and true. Sima Qian does not talk about heroes by success or failure, he pays more attention to the tendency of character. In his view, Xiang Yu has been through hardships and is upright but still courageous. Such a person can become a hero. *Records of Historian* was written by Sima Qian at the cost of tragic fate after he was sentenced to punishment. When Sima Qian angered Emperor Wu by defending the failed border general Li Ling and was sentenced to castration, both historical plans and the experiences of historical figures had special significance for Sima Qian. He is not the winner either, but he has gone through the same hardships as Xiang Yu. If Xiang Yu's image of a loser can be called a hero by future generations, then so does Sima Qian [7].

3. Reasons and Significance for Sima Qian's Creation of *Records of Historian*

3.1. Adhering to Filial Piety

It is not difficult to find that these tragic heroes have a similar ending - suicide. Sima Qian described their suicides as a release of sadness toward major setbacks and a relief from the desperate fate that cannot be extricated. However, in *A Reply to Ren An*, Sima Qian explained to his friend Ren An why he did not choose to commit suicide but lived in a humiliating way to create the *Records of Historian*. One of the reasons for Sima Qian's writing of *A Reply to Ren An*, which is well known and recognized by most future generations, is that Sima Qian sticks to "filial piety (Xiao Dao)". Sima Qian's father Sima Tan told him to continue the development of historiography, fulfill the duties of Tai Shi Lin (an imperial astronomer), and continue the creation of the *Records of Historian*. Completing his father's dying wish is a way for Sima Qian to adhere to "filial piety".

3.2. The Continuation of Life

The second reason why Sima Qian created the *Records of Historian* is that it can serve as a symbol of the continuation of life. After the Li Ling incident, Sima Qian was subjected to "castration punishment" under the inhuman criminal law. For ancient Chinese people who deeply respect "filial piety", this was undoubtedly the most humiliating and severe punishment. For a man, such punishment is undoubtedly a major blow to his dignity, and seriously, for a family, it means the end of the family's inheritance. In the *Records of Historian*, Sima Qian clearly expounded his view of life and death. In the text, Sima Qian used the word "noble" to describe suicide as a way to end life. But he also used "heavier than Mount Tai" and "lighter than a feather" as a metaphor to describe death from his perspective. If he chooses to commit suicide, neither will his death reach the heroic level like these tragic heroes nor will he wash away his humiliation or be eulogized and worshiped by future generations. Such a death is "as light as a feather" in his eyes. If he chooses to complete the mission entrusted to him by his father Sima Tan and the creation of the *Records of the Historian*, he can not only cleanse his humiliation but also save himself and his family.

3.3. A Manifestation of the Thoughts of Confucius

This is also one of his manifestations as a loyal follower of Confucius. Sima Qian's literary production theory, as mentioned above, is summarized with the word "Fa Fen" and evokes a fundamental contradiction in his life. Confucius, a representative of constraint, stood in front of Sima Qian. As his father recalled, such a model seemed to regulate Sima Qian's language and emotions [8]. It is also one of the reasons why Sima Qian intended to become the second Confucius. Confucius wrote "Chun Qiu", immortalizing people with noble characters like Bo Yi and Shu Qi, and making himself famous in history [9]. Even by the standards of earlier historical writings, Sima Qian was an idiosyncratic historian. Nowhere is this more clearly shown in his first "Biographies"

about the ancient hermits Bo Yi and Shu Qi. These are the earliest figures treated in the biographies, and Sima Qian begins by trying to separate figures of history from figures of legend. Yet very quickly the issue turns to questions of yielding power, right, starvation, and fairness. Readers can have the same resonance with Sima Qian in the sense of his own wrongs. Sima Qian affirms his faith in the Confucian Classics, trying to make sense of the suffering that good men have had to endure [10]. Here, Stephen Durrant 's *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian* is cited to further elaborate on this viewpoint and the relationship between Sima Qian and Confucius. Sima Qian restated the story of Bo Yi and Shu Qi to achieve the goal of restating his thoughts of Confucius and "filial piety", and also established his own name in history. Through this approach, Sima Qian knew that only in this way could he not be forgotten by history, and his father and family can survive.

4. Conclusion

Therefore, in a short summary, Sima Qian's creation of tragic heroes is actually aiming at an identity from those tragic heroes. They share more or less the same experiences as Sima Qian (a lack of ambition, unfavorable career paths, etc.), and share the same mindset (depression, sadness, anger, desire for achievement, etc.). In the eyes of Sima Qian, these tragic heroes were of his own kind, and he resonated emotionally and fatally with them. At the same time, these tragic heroes were consciously chosen by Sima Qian and became carriers of Sima Qian's consciousness. Through the creation of the *Records of Historian*, Sima Qian and his father can survive and be redeemed by the text. It can be concluded that Sima Qian's creation of the *Records of Historian* and his writing of tragic heroes are closely related to his personal fate.

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